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US nuclear policies are highly unstable

IF IRAQ, IRAN, and North Korea are the "axis of evil," why on earth is the United States treating them differently with respect to their access to nuclear weapons expertise and materials?

President Bush has singled out these three regimes for good reasons: (1) They are ruled by despotic, antidemocratic leaders; (2) They are determined to develop nuclear weapons programs; and (3) They are determined to develop the long- or intermediate-range missiles to deliver the nuclear weapons.

Moreover, each has long recognized that the best way to obtain nuclear weapons is to buy a nuclear power plant, ostensibly to produce electricity. Iraq is a good example. Here is a country awash in oil and with no apparent need for an alternative source of electricity. But when Iraq ordered a nuclear reactor in the late 1970s, France was ready to sell, and the French turned a blind eye to the transparent motive of this oil-rich regime. So it fell to Israel, acting alone, to halt Saddam Hussein's early efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction. In 1981, the Israeli Air Force flew a bombing raid on the French-built Osirak nuclear power plant and destroyed it.

Now, 21 years later, Washington is contemplating a full-scale invasion of Iraq, not a mere raid, to remove Saddam Hussein before he develops nuclear weapons.

But what about North Korea and Iran?

The United States, along with Japan and South Korea, has a deal with North Korea to provide it with two light water reactors. Incredibly, the same Bush adminis-

tration that pinned the label "axis of evil" on North Korea refuses to cancel a Clinton administration deal to provide the tools of nuclear destruction to Kim Jong Il's erratic and despotic regime. This is of grave concern given that country's refusal to provide a full accounting of its clandestine nuclear weapons activities and allow international inspectors access to all its suspected nuclear sites. So while we plot to invade one end of the evil axis, we trade nuclear materials with another.

The hypocrisy of this policy has had its predictable consequence. The Russians are proceeding with the sale and construction of a light water nuclear reactor in Bushehr, Iran, and they have plans to build up to five more reactors.

President Bush has tried to persuade the Russians to back out of this deal, but President Vladimir Putin responds with a question for which the Bush administration has no answer: As long as the United States is engaged in a deal that would hand over two nuclear reactors to North Korea, why isn't it appropriate for the Russians to engage in a similar deal with Iran? After all, both customers are signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the Russians can point out that Iran, unlike North Korea, has not threatened to withdraw from that treaty or violated a nuclear weapon safeguards agreement. Each sees the other's nuclear blind spot.

Putin says Russia must honor its nuclear deal with Iran for Russia's economic health and the stability of the Middle East. Bush says he must honor the nuclear deal with North Korea for the sta-

bility of the Korean Peninsula. Thus a new catchphrase — "the axis of evil" — is trumped by an old one — "a deal is a deal."

This is the same weak justification France used to excuse its reactor sale to Iraq. Moreover, both the United States and Russia, just like France in 1981, say the International Atomic Energy Agency can be trusted to ensure that nuclear materials are not diverted to make nuclear bombs. How ironic that we now resort to the same reassurances that Saddam Hussein gave when Israel objected to the construction of the Osirak reactor. But Hussein is no fool. He knows better than anyone that a regime bent on obtaining nuclear weapons cannot be stopped with international safeguards. Hussein bombed the Bushehr reactor in Iran twice during the Iran-Iraq War to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear technologies. They both know the other country has so much cheap oil and gas for electricity generation that the arguments for needing nuclear power are laughable.

It is time we took off the blinders. The United States cannot persuade Russia to stop its sale to Iran unless we stop our deal with North Korea. The United States and Russia are in a position to help both these countries meet their legitimate need for electricity. This can and should be done using nonnuclear options such as oil, gas, or coal-fired plants. We must unite on a policy of denying to North Korea and Iran the materials and technology needed to make nuclear bombs. Only then will the United States and Russia be in a position to confront the threat from Iraq together to ensure that no dangerous regime acquires nuclear weapons.

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